



LIGHT HOUSE STUDIO

REMINISCENCES OF A DECEASED HAVANA

By: Reynaldo González

Art's stratagems are assisted today by possibilities unknown a mere few decades ago. One of them was christened as "appropriation", which we could also describe as a translation into a recent or modern language, insofar as post-modernity allows, towards a post-post extending into everyday life and time. It translates a liberal view owing many disciplines, among them, the utilitarian graphics of publicity that at once set a rhythm to and urge our paces.

Since the auspicious times of pop-art, the gaze of plastic artists armed itself with these empowerments, the marks of sacrosanct consumerism landed on canvases and etchings, with the aid of photography and various other means. The propitiatory god was Andy Warhol, with his larger-than-life preserves cans and staccato series of artists' and celebrities' faces. Resorting to an oft-used term, thus now deprived of its gravitational pull, it is about "an aesthetic" and its discursive variants. It is on this terrain that Cuban artist Kadir trudges. Appropriation is the essential element of this exhibit, a recycling that takes it as the base metal of a reminiscing effort: signs turned into vials for past surroundings, translucent images of a Havana, not for deceased infants,¹ but a deceased Havana refusing to pass away.

The works of Kadir López Nieves, born 1972, in Las Tunas, a provincial Cuban town, have come across a swift windfall: in the course of very few years they have whirled

¹ Translator's note: In Spanish, play on words from Cuban writer G. Cabrera Infante's novel *La Habana para un Infante Difunto*, literally, "Havana for a deceased infant", which is in turn, a play on words from the writer's surname "Infante" that is the Spanish word for "infant". The novel was translated into English under the title *Infante's Inferno*.



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through museums, galleries and showrooms –and are also found in private collections- in New York, Caracas, London, Madrid, Dallas, Bogotá, Ontario, Texas, Miami, Santo Domingo, Nicosia, Guadalajara, Beirut, Toronto, Berlin, Lima ... It is a sojourn unimaginable in other times. His trajectory drew a capsizing of the demands of the traditional easel into formal innovation, installations and, as we see now, experimentation with objects that transcend due to their own iconic nature, supports for new underscored meanings.

From publicity's entreaties in one of the Latin-American cities that was most forcefully –and earliest- immersed in the boom of advertisements and mass media, brimming with signs, to the lack thereof, swept away by the absence of the merchandizing mechanism, a mere recollection, objects left as dusty antiques. These signs, eroded by the unforgiving salty sea wind and abandonment, in themselves an evocation of a non-existence, receive the unusual visit of the phantasmagoria of the city that they enlivened in the past. The artist has sought out the pieces of porcelain-lacquered steel and other extremely resistant materials, where he sets down images of the city that housed them, sometimes the actual place where they stood, a provocation to the startled eye of the viewer and offering themselves up for diverse interpretations. Now the signs “contain” the city, they support a past and fixate a request for change.

In these reminiscences, the Havana of old times –which was not young artist Kadir's Havana- is accompanied by waves of information of an almost anthropological nature: the people, the streets, the corners where the stroller felt accosted by the offer of a soft drink, of motor oil for his car, of habitual services in his metropolitan flowing existence. It is not possible to go back in time to that reality, but one can delve into it, through the miracle of aesthetic imagination in objects the materiality of which acquires a new life of its own.



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There are the old steel planks, with their volume, their rectangular, round, or oval structures, their colors now faded, and as a nostalgic stroke, the streets, the silhouette of the skyscrapers, the enticing curve of the *Malecón habanero*, all stealing away from the stains and scars left by time. And there too are the faces that marked an era, the steps and facial expressions of the workmen who built the landscape –notice that the depiction of laborers in still motion abounds; the flow of a life refusing to disappear, underscoring its character as a nebulous juxtaposition. That, which was then called “the Paris of the Caribbean”, peers out with discreet seduction, modest winks, from behind the publicity that animated its past life.

The incited memory allows one to hear the surf surrounding the maritime city, the horns of those cars that were being «serviced» in the neighboring gas station –it says so on the fuel label of the spare tire. It is as if we could run into those who are in hurry, hat-sporting gentlemen in a time when hats were still the norm; as if we could feel the orders barked by the foremen to those operating the concrete mixers on the road under construction. It is as if we went up on the rooftop where the photographer stood to capture the layout of the streets extending towards the sea, as if we could shelter beneath the shadow of the tents on sidewalks in front of businesses, sidestep the ornamental gardens and elude the ebullient traffic of that bustling and promiscuous Havana. The inescapable brands of everyday products are now the frame through which we travel back to an existence that only awaits animation, as if in film scenes that allow us to be, at once, the spectator and the protagonist.

It is a bedeviled miracle, a matter of unexplained necromancy –who would really wish for the crude explanation of the ruse on the face of joyous illusion? -that of the art that these pieces regale those who lived in this city with, or those who, for centuries, perceived the scent of its myth. In some of them, we are overcome by the life lived by its inhabitants, and it is left to our perception to gather the strength to

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reconstruct it. Is it not poetry, this transition from a glance into imaginative compulsion? We approach a city where publicity was preeminent, an outstanding environment in the New World; growth mistaken for development, a mirage of wellbeing in a population consuming ideas along with products, notions of what it wants or needs, and of itself; a city, an icon of itself, signs turned into fetishes as a hurtful reminder of what constituted the proposition of a present. The signs are/were the city that held them; now they contain the city, they hold its memory. When sharpening our sight onto this playful manipulation of images, the transparencies atop surprising supports in turn question us: Which is the image, which the support, which the content, which the container? Where is the beginning or the end of what someone once called the “historical erosion” of a famous and celebrated geographical location? How is the seed of an imperious deterioration, an unstopped fainting, set in motion? It is a setting of confusion for the eye that watches, and the mind that evokes, or imagines. It is an art game, an appropriation, an act of mischief, that of this Kdir that imposes a seductive presumption upon us.

Realization endows the artist with the condition of an omniscient demiurge and involves us in its game. Let us play.

Source:

Signs. Catalogue. La Acacia Gallery, Havana, 2009.